

THE MYSTERY OF THE OLMEC CIVILISATION

The Olmecs, who pre-dated the Maya, left behind artifacts featuring images of Africans, Orientals and Europeans, suggestive of wide-ranging contact between many cultures via transoceanic travel.

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We can trace the progress of man in Mexico without noting any definite Old World influence during this period (1000–650 BC) except a strong Negroid substratum connected with the Magicians (High Priests).

— Frederick Peterson, *Ancient Mexico* (1959)

The discovery of the Olmecs

The oldest and probably greatest mystery of early Mexico, and Central America in general, is that of the Olmecs. Academic archaeologists now often refer to the Olmecs as proto-Mayans or Olmans, meaning inhabitants of Olman, the "Olmec land" as it is now being called. When one looks at the enigmatic cave drawings and the gigantic, perfectly carved heads with their the trademark "frown" and militaristic look, an emphatic question leaps to the forebrain: "Who were these weirdos?"

The strange world of the Olmecs is only now being pieced together. In their art, Olmecs are often dressed in leather helmets, have a broad face with thick lips and a broad nose, have a mean-looking expression and could easily be likened to a bunch of angry African Rugby players, maybe from Nigeria or Tanzania. While mainstream archaeologists assure us that Africans never colonised Mexico or Central America, the layperson looks at these statues and heads and wonders how academia can make such a blatantly wrong assertion, one that is startlingly unscientific at its very core. Even though it is sanctioned by the hallowed halls of academia to tell the masses of tourists and students alike that these were not Africans, one must conclude that these academics are blind or insane—or both!

What is fascinating about this enigmatic civilisation to us modern viewers is how the Olmecs represented themselves. In addition to some sculptures showing Negroid features, many artifacts depict individuals with Oriental or European features. It is therefore very interesting to pay close attention to how the figures are presented—their dress and head gear, the shape of their eyes, nose, ears and mouth, the way they held their hands and the expressions on their faces. It is all wonderful art at its finest. Their expressions, and also the symbolism in the objects they hold or are associated with, seem to indicate a high level of sophistication and a shared iconography. What does it all mean? Who were these people? Were they isolated villagers or strangers from a faraway land?

Until the 1930s, it was largely held that the oldest civilisation in the Americas was that of the Maya. The great quantity of Mayan monuments, stelae, pottery, statues and other artifacts discovered throughout the Yucatán Peninsula, Guatemala and the Gulf Coast of Mexico had convinced archaeologists that the Maya was the mother civilisation of Central America. But some "Mayan artifacts" were different from the main bulk of the artifacts in subtle ways. One difference was that some carvings of large heads have faces with more African-looking features than many of the other Mayan works. Mayan paintings and sculpture can be quite varied, but the African-looking features seemed distinctly un-Mayan. These African-looking heads often have a curious frown and wear masks or appear to be a half-jaguar/half-man beast. This recurring motif did not fit in with other Mayan finds.

In 1929, Marshall H. Saville, director of the Museum of the American Indian in New York, classified these works as being from an entirely new culture that was not of Mayan heritage. Somewhat inappropriately, he called this culture "Olmec" (a name first assigned to it in 1927), which means "rubber people" in Náhuatl, the language of the Mexica (Aztec) people. Most of the early anomalous artifacts were found in the Tabasco and Veracruz areas of southern Mexico, a swampy region now exploited for natural gas and

oil but in ancient times exploited for its rubber trees. Ancient Mesoamericans, spanning from the Olmecs to the Aztecs, extracted latex from *Castilla elastica* and mixed it with the juice of a local vine, *Ipomoea alba*, to create rubber as early as 1600 BC (and possibly earlier). At the much later time of Aztec dominance, "Olmec" was the Aztec name for the people who lived in this area.

The Olmecs are now credited with creating the ball game—as well as the rubber balls that were used—that played such a significant role in all Mesoamerican civilisations. Indeed, this game may be even older than the Olmecs. Ball courts and the Olmec–Mayan ball game were popular even as far north as Arizona and Utah and as far south as Costa Rica and Panama.

According to the famous Mexican archaeologist Ignacio Bernal, Olmec-type art was first studied as early as 1869 but, as noted above, the term "Olmec" was first used in 1927. Naturally, a number of prominent archaeologists—including Eric Thompson, who helped decipher the Mayan calendar—refused to believe that this new Olmec culture could be dated as earlier than the Maya. Not until a special meeting in Mexico City in 1942 was the matter largely settled that the Olmecs pre-dated the Maya, but the date for the beginning of the Olmec culture was to remain a matter of great debate.

The discovery of the Olmecs cast doubt on many old assumptions about the prehistory of the Americas. Suddenly, here was a diverse-looking people who built monumental sculptures with amazing skill, were the "inventors" of the number and writing system as well as the ball/game used by the Maya, and even knew about the wheel (as evidenced by their wheeled toys).

Transoceanic colonisers?

Bernal continued to study the Olmecs and came out with the only significant work on the subject, *The Olmec World* (1969). He discusses the curious finds attributed to the Olmecs all over southern Mexico and Central America and as far south as the site of Guanacaste in Nicaragua. However, he could not figure out the origin of these strange and distinctive people whose art featured bearded men, Negroid heads and indecipherable hieroglyphs. Bernal thought that even such famous Mayan sites as Uaxactun and El Mirador had been previously occupied by the Olmecs.

Still, orthodox archaeologists such as the well-known British writer and archaeologist Nigel Davies maintain that the Olmecs could not have been the result of any transatlantic or transpacific contact. Davies essentially says that the Olmecs may have originated at Monte Albán in the Oaxaca highlands, at Oxtotitlán or Juxtlahuaca near Acapulco on the Pacific coast, or most likely at Tres Zapotes and La Venta in the swamps along the Gulf of Mexico. All of these areas have known Olmec sites.

The idea that the strange Olmec Negroid heads might have been the result of early African exploration seems totally alien to the historians and archaeologists who have taken over the archaeology of the Americas. Despite depictions in Olmec art of various lords, kings, travellers, magicians and whatnot that look like Africans, Chinese, bearded Europeans or some other strangers, most professors teaching at our major universities maintain that these are not evidence of ancient pre-Columbian explorers. They admit, though, that people might erroneously get this idea from a

"superficial" view of these various statues and carvings.

Archaeologists are thus confronted with a major problem that they prefer not to deal with. They claim that the Negroid heads are not African (or Oriental as many appear), but they admit that these giant stone heads and other statues do, indeed, appear to be depictions of Africans. Why would that be the case? How is it that American Indians look like Africans? Other civilisations, such as the Maya, generally *do* look like American Indians, as we would expect. Mainstream archaeologists are forced to invent an explanation for this obvious puzzle, no matter how feeble an explanation it may be.

So, even to mainstream historians, the origin of the Olmecs is a mystery. In the realm of alternative history, there are many theories on how the Olmec peoples arrived in Central America, apart from walking across the Siberian land bridge in remote prehistory. One theory is that the Negroid population was connected with the civilisation of Atlantis; as part of its warrior class, they were tough and hard bitten. Or perhaps they were part of an Egyptian colony in Central America, or from some unknown African empire. Others have suggested that some Olmecs came across the Pacific from the lost continent of Mu or as Shang Chinese mercenaries. Lending credence to these ideas is the curious portrayal of "magicians" (or shamanic sorcerers) using magic mushrooms and other psychedelics in many of the Olmec

statues. Were they magicians from Africa, China or even Atlantis?

It is not known what name the ancient Olmecs used for themselves. Some later Mesoamerican accounts seem to refer to the ancient Olmec peoples as "Tamoanchan". The classic period for the Olmecs is generally considered to be from 1200 BC, ending around 400 BC. Early, formative Olmec artifacts are said to go back to 1500 BC and probably earlier.

No one really knows where the Olmecs came from, but the two

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predominant theories are:

1. They were Native Americans, derived from the same Siberian stock as most other Native Americans, and just happened to accentuate the Negroid genetic material latent in their genes.
2. They were outsiders who immigrated to the Olman area via boat, most likely as sailors or passengers on transoceanic voyages that went on for probably hundreds of years.

At the centre of the debate about the origin of the Olmecs is the classic struggle between isolationists (who think that ancient man was incapable of transoceanic voyages, and therefore nearly every ancient culture developed on its own) and diffusionists (who think that ancient man was able to span the oceans, which explains similarities in widely disparate cultures).

There are a few proponents of diffusionism at the traditional academic level. Ivan van Sertima of Rutgers University in New Jersey actively promotes the diffusionist theory that ancient man crossed both the Atlantic and the Pacific in prolonged transoceanic contact. His books, including the co-edited *African Presence in Early Asia* (1985) and *African Presence in Early America* (1987), are filled with articles and photos that show without a doubt that Negroes have lived literally all over the world, including in the ancient Americas, and developed many advanced civilisations. However, he does not bring in such unorthodox theories concerning Atlantis or a lost continent in the Pacific.

Unfortunately, most of the writers in the academic field prefer to champion the isolationist theories to the virtual exclusion of the diffusionist. In *The Olmecs: America's First Civilisation* (2004), Richard A. Diehl has only one paragraph on the subject:

"The origins of Olmec culture have intrigued scholars and laypeople alike since Tres Zapotes Colossal Head I, a gigantic stone human head with vaguely Negroid features, was discovered in Veracruz 140 years ago. Since that time, Olmec culture and art have been attributed to seafaring Africans, Egyptians, Nubians, Phoenicians, Atlanteans, Japanese, Chinese, and other ancient wanderers. As often happens, the truth is infinitely more logical, if less romantic: the Olmecs were Native Americans who created a unique culture in southeastern Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Archaeologists now trace Olmec origins back to pre-Olmec cultures in the region and there is no credible evidence for major intrusions from the outside. Furthermore, not a single *bona fide* artifact of Old World origin has ever appeared in an Olmec archaeological site, or for that matter anywhere else in Mesoamerica."

With this paragraph, Diehl summarily dismisses all theories and evidence of transoceanic contact. We don't really know what a *bona fide* artifact would be, since Old World and New World artifacts were often identical. Also, we are given no further information on the pre-Olmec cultures from which the Olmecs presumably derived.

But for the Olmecs actually to be Africans—not just look like them—they would almost certainly have come to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec via ship. But since such voyages are dismissed immediately with no further discussion, the Olmecs simply had to have been local boys who had pretty much always been there. At some time in remote prehistory, their early genetic group walked into this Olmec heartland area.

According to Diehl, the Olmecs would have been an isolated group within their region as well, having little contact with other tribes in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. However, if the Olmecs were isolated from neighbours only a few hours' walk away, they certainly wouldn't have had contact with people across an ocean, would they? Diehl's view is largely accepted in many universities today, but would almost certainly seem to be wrong.

The Olmec settlements, according to Diehl, rose up independently in their corner of Mesoamerica without the influence of any other culture. They all suddenly began making monumental statues out of basalt (one of the hardest and most difficult stones to carve) and made large structures with sophisticated drainage systems. But they weren't really in contact with their early neighbours, he believes. The spread of Olmec-like artifacts was achieved only later when Olmec "styles" were used by other, more widespread, cultures.

Diehl was actually proved wrong on this account when, in January 2007, it was announced that a 2,500-year-old Olmec-influenced city had been found at Zazacatla, in the vicinity of Chalcatzingo and Cuernavaca, hundreds of miles from Olmec

Gulf Coast territory. Did the Olmecs have an extended influence in northern Mexico? Did they have some hand in building the mysterious pyramids at Teotihuacán?

Archaeologists have now concluded that the Olmecs inhabited a very large area of southern Mexico, much greater than had ever been imagined. This discovery is not really surprising, since the Olmec city of Chalcatzingo near Mexico City was excavated and written about in the 1970s.

So, the preponderance of the evidence shows that the Olmecs were very aware of the villages near to them, and aware of cities and peoples quite far from them. Were they aware of transoceanic civilisations as well?



An Olmec statue at the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, Mexico.

A shamanic culture

The Olmecs had many unusual similarities with the Maya and other transoceanic cultures, such as reverence for jade and exotic feathers, the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms and other psychedelic drugs and the use of hieroglyphs on stone stelae as markers. Says Diehl of the artifacts found at the Olmec burial site at Tlatilco:

"One high-status woman was laid to rest with 15 pots, 20 clay figurines, 2 pieces of red-painted bright-green jadeite that may have formed part of a bracelet, a crystalline hematite plaque, a bone fragment with traces of al fresco paint, and miscellaneous stones. Another burial held the remains of a male whose skull had been deliberately modified in infancy and whose teeth were trimmed into geometric patterns as an adult. He may have been a shaman since all the objects placed with him were likely part of a shaman's power

bundle.

They included small *metates* for grinding hallucinogenic mushrooms, clay effigies of mushrooms, quartz, graphite, pitch, and other exotic materials that could have been used in curing rituals. A magnificent ceramic bottle placed in his grave depicted a contortionist or acrobat who rests on his stomach with his hands supporting his chin while his legs bend completely around so that his feet touch the top of his head. Could this masterpiece be an effigy of the actual occupant of the grave?"

Indeed, Diehl almost gets excited about the Olmecs. Could they actually have been psychedelic jaguar shamans who liked to make monumental heads to keep themselves busy?

While it is easy to see the Olmecs as proto-Mayans and citizens of Olman (however large that country may have been), we should also consider them as the fantastic proto-Mesoamericans they may have been: psychedelic aliens who used lasers to cut colossal basalt heads; as Atlantean refugees who made a last stand in Tabasco; or as Shang Chinese mercenaries taken from East Africa or Melanesia and specially trained to administer the Pacific (and later Atlantic) ports of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; or perhaps as a people originally from the Atlantic side all along, having come from Africa possibly as a military force from Egypt or West Africa circa 1500 BC. There are many possibilities.

The land of Olman

The Olmecs are said to have occupied "the land of Olman", a designation that the Aztecs used to describe the jungle areas of the nearby coast. The Olmec heartland is thought to have been an area of the Gulf of Mexico on the coastal plain of southern Veracruz and Tabasco states—an area that boasts the greatest number of Olmec sites and monuments. It is considered to be the most northerly area of the Mayan realms, with such sites as Comacalco being among the northernmost Mayan settlements along the Gulf Coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

This Olmec heartland area is about 125 miles (201.2 kilometres) long and 50 miles (80.5 km) wide, with the Coatzacoalcos river system running through the middle. It is characterised by swampy lowlands punctuated by low hill ridges and volcanoes. The Tuxtla Mountains rise sharply to the north, along the Bay of Campeche. Here the Olmecs constructed permanent city-temple complexes at several locations: San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (usually referred to as just San Lorenzo), Laguna de los Cerros, Tres Zapotes, La Mojarra and La Venta.

The Olmecs also had great influence beyond the heartland, as Olmec goods have been found from Chalcatzingo, far to the west in the highlands of Mexico, to Izapa, on the Pacific coast near what is now Guatemala. In fact, they have been found throughout Mesoamerica, including south along the Pacific coast of Guatemala and El Salvador and as far away as Costa Rica and even Panama.

Over 170 Olmec monuments have been found within the heartland area, with 80 per cent of those occurring at the three largest Olmec centres—La Venta in Tabasco State plus San Lorenzo and Laguna de los Cerros, both in Veracruz State. These three major centres are spaced from east to west across the domain so that each could exploit the distinct set of natural resources of each area. La

Venta is near the rich estuaries of the coast and could have provided cacao, rubber and salt. San Lorenzo, at the centre of the Olmec domain, controlled the vast flood plain area of the Coatzacoalcos basin and riverline trade routes, while the westernmost Laguna de los Cerros, adjacent to the Tuxtla Mountains, is near the important basalt quarries used in the manufacture of *metates* (corn grinders) and the megalithic statues, prismatic logs and monuments.

The Olmec heartland is part of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrowest land area in Mexico, between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. It would have been extremely important if an ocean-to-ocean trade route had been established. Diffusionists (who advocate transoceanic contact between the Americas and Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands) maintain that important ports were used by ancient seafarers, and an overland trade link between the Pacific and Atlantic ports would have been

highly desirable—just as European engineers decided they needed a canal across a narrow area of Central America 200 years ago.

Olmec art and architecture

Stone monuments and engravings attributed to the Olmecs have been found in lower Central America, central Mexico and the Gulf Coast. Ignacio Bernal has this to say in *The Olmec World*:

"...In the central depression and, generally speaking, in the entire state of Chiapas, Olmec remains or others related to it appear constantly, though—as in other regions of Central America—they do not constitute the basis or majority of archaeological finds. We are dealing with a culture related to the Olmec, though with its own peculiar features.

"Black ceramics with white rims or spots appear quite frequently. At other sites such as San Agustín and on the Pacific coast of Chiapas the same ware has been found in scientific explorations. At

Santa Cruz it is clearly associated with other types belonging to the Olmec complex. At Mirador abundant Olmec figurines have been unearthed.

"Even more obviously Olmec is the stela of Padre Piedra, which bears a representation of a standing personage; another man seems to be kneeling in front of him. It stands seven feet tall in its present state and originally was even larger. It can be of only local fabrication. This stela may have been associated with ceramics corresponding to Periods I and II of Chiapa de Corzo, which are Olmecoid. Another low relief on a rock near Batehaton is also markedly Olmec in style, and other Olmec objects are to be found at numerous sites such as Simojovel and Ocozocuahtla."

What Bernal is trying to establish here is that Olmecs were not just on the Atlantic coast but also on the Pacific coast of Chiapas. He also says that the Pacific sites may be older than the Atlantic

"heartland" sites and that some Mayan sites in the area, such as Izapa, were originally Olmec.

One of the most famous statues in the National Museum of Costa Rica in San José is an Olmec hunchback figure with an elongated cranium and Oriental-type Olmec eyes. Costa Rica is also the site of the perfectly formed granite balls that defy explanation. Were they made by the Olmecs in a similar manner as the colossal heads?

Given that sites like Tonalá and Izapa were early Olmec sites that were later occupied by the Maya, other sites such as Monte Albán, further north towards the Valley of Mexico, can be assumed to have been first inhabited by the Olmecs and then by later cultures.

In the 1940s, once they had been established as the oldest culture in Mesoamerica, the Olmecs by default were regarded as the founders of many of the ancient cities. Essentially, if it could



An Olmec statue at the Museum of Anthropology, Xalapa, Mexico.

be proved that Olmec iconography was being used at an archaeological site, then it must have been the Olmecs who founded that city, since the Olmecs were the oldest culture. While there may well have been earlier cultures than the Olmecs in Mesoamerica, none has been specifically identified by archaeologists (at least that I am aware of).

Since the oldest Mayan sites such as Uaxactun in the Petén jungles north of Tikal are thought to have been first built by the Olmecs, it is possible that other older Mayan sites—such as Copán, El Mirador and Piedras Negras—were also founded by the Olmecs.

The important Chalcatzingo archaeological site is located at the base of Cerro de la Canterera, a twin-peaked outcropping in the southeastern part of Morelos, just south of Mexico City. Carvings found at the site depict mythical and religious themes associated with agriculture and fertility. The stone engravings and sculptures at this site became the focus of interest in 1934 during studies by archaeologist Eulalia Guzmán. The area holds remnants of various cultures from 3000 BC to the present day, which indicate the presence of outsiders to the region, including a strong Olmec influence thought to have reached its peak between 700 BC and 500 AD.

Archaeologists have theorised that Chalcatzingo was an outpost of the Olmec heartland, established to facilitate trading. Olmec traders brought ceramics, agricultural goods and raw materials from other Olmec areas and Chalcatzingo became a trade centre in the region. The site includes low reliefs and sculptures such as "the King" and "the Flying Man", a mural of fertility, a procession, "the Puma" and "the Queen" as well as structures such as the "Tlahuica altar", the "Olmec altar" and a ball court. Many examples of the art and features of the site were published in David C. Grove's 1984 book *Chalcatzingo: Excavations on the Olmec Frontier*.

One of the greatest and most famous of the Olmec sites, La Venta, is typically dated to have been active between 1200 BC and 400 BC, which places the major development of the city in the so-called Middle Formative Period. Located 18 miles (29 km) inland on an island in a coastal swamp overlooking the then-flowing Río Palma, La Venta would have controlled a region between the Mezcalapa and Coatzacoalcos rivers. The main part of the site is a complex of clay constructions stretched out for 12 miles (19.3 km) in a north-south direction, although the site is 8° west of true north. Many of the site's fabulous monuments are now on display in the archaeological museum and park in the city of Villahermosa, Tabasco, the oil capital of Mexico. La Venta and nearby San Lorenzo, close to the Tuxtla Mountains, were the source of many of the colossal heads that the Olmecs are so famous for.

Marking the southern end of La Venta's ceremonial precinct is an enormous pyramidal mound. Standing at the base is Stela 25/26, which depicts a bundled zoomorphic creature with foliage at the top that is thought to represent a "world tree" or *axis mundi*. The northern end of Complex A is mainly an enclosed courtyard with a massive underground serpentine deposit, thought to represent the primordial waters of creation.

Buried beneath the enclosed courtyard was Offering 4, a now famous funeral offering that is an arrangement of six jade celts (adzes) and 15 jade figures of Olmecs with elongated craniums and Oriental-looking eyes. A single figure that faces the others is

carved from granite. The figures stand together amongst the upright jade celts that apparently represent in miniature the tall granite stelae that were commonly used by the Olmecs and Maya (as well as Egyptians, Hindus and other cultures). This exquisite arrangement can now be seen at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City and is one of the most famous displays in the Olmec section.

Also found at La Venta is the famous Altar 4, which probably functioned as a throne. This massive piece of carved basalt, weighing tons, depicts a ruler wearing a bird headdress and seated within a niche. He holds onto a rope that stretches around to the sides of the altar. On the side of the altar that has not been defaced is a seated individual whose hands are bound by the rope, seemingly as a captive. Another suggestion is that it perhaps represents ancestral lineage. Above the seated ruler on the front of the altar is the enormous open maw of a feline creature. This gaping jaguar mouth appears to be metaphorically related to the open portal from which the ruler is emerging.

While La Venta is thought to have been the "capital" or most important city of the Olmecs, this may not actually have been the case. We know so little about the Olmecs that it is impossible to say for sure how important La Venta was or whether there were not more important cities and ceremonial sites for the Olmecs. For instance, some Olmec sites could be underwater in the Gulf of Mexico or still buried in the swamps of Tabasco and Veracruz.

Or major Olmec sites could have been located in the interior of Mexico, as is the case with Chalcatzingo or the recently discovered Zazacatla site nearby. These sites are quite a distance from the so-called Olmec heartland and suggest that the Olmec lands—Olman—were quite extensive.

The mystery remains

The more we find out about the Olmecs, the deeper the mystery surrounding them becomes. We find that the Olmecs seem to include nearly every racial type in the world.

How is this possible? The Olmecs are credited with everything from inventing the wheel, the ballgame and hieroglyphic writing, and it is now known that they controlled most of southern Mexico from shore to shore.

From a diffusionist point of view, the land of Olman may well have been the "centre of the world", as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec would indeed have been the centre of the world if there had been a strong transoceanic trade across both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. If such trade and movement of ships did occur, the land of the Olmecs might well have been a cosmopolitical centre where worldwide cultures intermingled. It is hoped that upcoming discoveries will lead us to a better understanding of the Olmecs and their origin.

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